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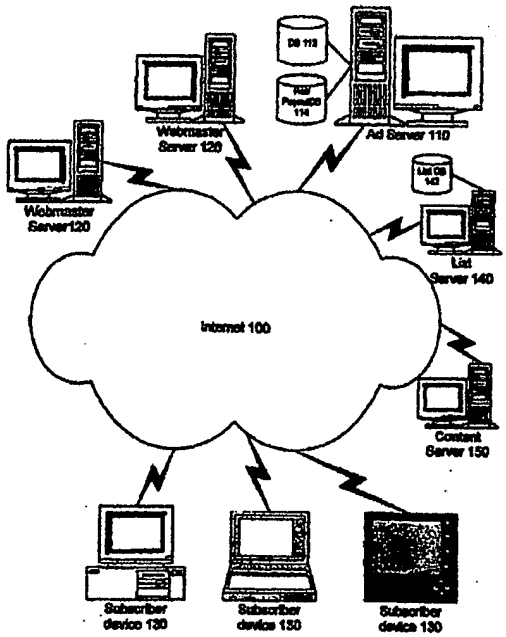
(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR AN E-MAIL AFFILIATE PROGRAM



(57) Abstract: The present invention makes it easy to collect, manage, and communicate with consumers using e-mail and other forms of push-based messaging as the primary vehicle for communication of marketing content. The software makes it simple to offer bounties or other types of compensation to any participant interested in referring new users to into the system as well as offer a multiple tier referral system so that those participants can refer others as well. The present invention makes it possible to track the entire path of a communication and all of the actions inside of it for modeling and other analytical purposes; simplifies the process for generating custom marketing communications, in large capacity; simplifies the process of enabling the selection, insertion and delivery of marketing communications inside of the main communication layer and enables an administrator to easily administer all aspects of the software from an intuitive web based interface.

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Title: **Method and Apparatus for an E-mail Affiliate Program**

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention is drawn to an e-mail affiliate program and process for marketing purposes. It includes software for the implementation of a system to produce e-mail marketing lists. A preferred embodiment for these lists is to supply subscribers for Internet publications commonly known as "ezines".

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

In recent years, the exponential growth of the network of computer networks known as the Internet has also lead to enormous growth in the area of "on-line" advertising. One popular channel of on-line advertising has been e-mail.

Typically, entities have collected e-mail addresses from various sources, such as by manually collecting or using spiders or bots to collect e-mail addresses from news groups or auction sites on the Internet. They then broadcast or "spam" an identical, unsolicited marketing message to their collected list. Needless to say, these unsolicited messages annoy most recipients and result in very low response rates. Additionally, many recipients regard the "spam" as an invasion of their privacy.What is needed is a system that sends marketing messages only to those who "opt-in" and increases both the number of participants and/or the number of responses by offering incentives.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is drawn to software that allows an enterprise to offer cash, prizes, or incentives to webmasters or consumers in exchange for their assistance in (i) accumulating subscribers or e-mail addresses and/or (ii) getting subscribers to view advertisements or to refer associates to the program.

The subscribers (typically subscribed via their e-mail address) may subscribe for content-based subscriptions/newsletters/alerts, marketing message only-based subscriptions/mailings, and incentive-based subscriptions where the subscriber mayreceivc incentives, such as payment in cash, program points toward prizes, discounts on products or

opportunities to win sweepstakes, in exchange for responding to future e-mails and other marketing messages or content delivered through internet-enabled channels.

The present invention includes:

a) a sign-up means that allows webmasters or consumers to enter their information, including e-mail address, and the right to market to it, online through a web browser so that they can participate into the program;

b) a set of instructions and computer coding into which the webmaster or participant must use as a method of which to promote the program , including prompting the user for an action, like entering information or clicking somewhere, before they are eligible;

c) a statistical interface which provides the webmaster or participant with a way to see how many subscribers and/or referrals they have generatedand or what revenue/prizes/incentives they have accumulated to date (either instantly directly after the transaction, or at any time as a cumulative sum of all chance possibilities that have occurred in the past); and

d) a software application which allows an administrator of the program to

1) view accounts of participants,

2) view number of participants,

3) edit information on participants,

4) keep track of subscriber and webmaster referral information, and

5) send e-mails to the subscribers and/or the participants.

The software allows a consumer to sign-up to subscribe for delivery of information or content such as ezines, newsletters, alerts or marketing messages with each such delivery to be sent to the subscriber's e-mail address. Consumers may subscribe for more than one offering (i.e., co-registration).

The e-mail delivery system of the present invention includes a system that consists of software and hardware allowing the owner of a mailing list the ability to e-mail out marketing messages to their subscribers and enable them to track the responses of those messages.

Tracking of responses includes:

a) whether the subscriber received the e-mail, opened the e-mail, read the e-mail, how long they read the e-mail, did they perform any action inside of the e-mail such as fill in information, click on a hyperlink;

b) the geographic location of the subscriber(s), area code, domain name, ISP, sex, marital status, occupation, etc... this reporting can be in the form of individually reported data or group reported data;

c) the ability to track subscribers over time in regards to all of the e-mails they have received, the ads they have received, the ads they have responded to, characteristics about that subscriber, including, but not limited to, observed behavior, demograhic and pyschographic data that is available on the subscriber;

d) the ability to track on a timeline when any of the actions, such as opening, clicking, etc., occurred for the population sample mailed to; and

e) the ability to send different messages to sample groups with the same info, decision which message is most effective, and send more of the better-performing message to the rest of the population with the same or similar demographics/details.

It is an object of the present invention to provide software that allows an enterprise to offer cash, prizes, or incentives to webmasters or consumers in exchange for their assistance in (i) accumulating subscribers or e-mail addresses and/or (ii) getting subscribers to view advertisements or to refer associates to the program.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to reliably deliver marketing messages to millions of recipients on a periodic or demand basis.

It is a further object of the invention to store e-mail marketing information directly in a database instead of flat files or other file formats.

It is another object of the invention to import existing participant e-mail marketing information from flat files or other file formats into a new database.

It is another object of the invention to keep e-mail marketing statistics about each e-mail subscriber, including: lists subscribed (including start and end date), total number of e-mails sent to this subscriber, which ads e-mailed to this subscriber, and which ads clicked by this subscriber.

It is yet another object of the invention to keep statistics about each referring participant in an e-mail marketing program, including the number of subscribers referred and the referring (multi-level) participant.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability for e-mail marketing list creator to submit each issue's content via a web interface.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability for e-mail marketing recipients to subscribe or unsubscribe to one or more lists via e-mail via an internet, with web-based confirmation.

It is another object of the invention to provide the ability to launch list distribution for e-mail marketing via a web-based interface for one or more mailing lists, allowing administrators to specify a time to automatically launch the distribution.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability for participants to sign-up for an e-mail marketing program via a web-based interface, and indicate a referring webmaster or subscriber.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability for participants in an e-mail marketing program to check their statistics via a web-based interface.

It is another object of the invention to allow subscribers to modify their sign-up profile, including the list of information or content they want to receive.

It is another object of the invention to provide the ability to monitor the performance of the content delivery in an e-mail marketing system, including status of particular content (current status, % of content delivered, time started/stopped, etc), system throughput (number of recipients per each piece of content delivered, per day, bounced e-mails, etc.), subscription/unsubscription per day per particular content, and bandwidth usage.

It is another object of the invention to remove bogus/undeliverable addresses in an e-mail marketing system.

It is another object of the invention to provide an e-mail marketing program with real-time or batch subscribe and delete facilities via a web or an e-mail interface.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to show ads on "public" web interfaces to the content delivery system in an e-mail marketing program (i.e., when subscribers confirm their subscription, show an ad on that page).

It is an object of the invention to provide documentation on how each component of an e-mail marketing system works.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to test an e-mail marketing system.

It is an object of the invention to provide a web or an e-mail interface to allow e-mail marketing subscribers to retrieve ezine back issues with new ads.

It is an object of the invention to provide personalized content and ads for individual

recipients, specifically selecting content based upon attributes in a subscriber database (e.g., gender, age, chosen topics, etc.).

It is an object of the invention to provide an HTML sniffer to determine if a given e-mail marketing subscriber can receive HTML e-mail.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to add/edit/modify ads stored in a database via web interface.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to detect fraud in an e-mail marketing program.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to monitor e-mail marketing system CPU/memory/disk/throughput usage on an hourly/daily/monthly or other assessment period basis.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to gather info about qmail usage via qmailanalog package.

It is an object of the invention to integrate ad responses in an e-mail marketing system with an advertising server, including the ability to track which ads a subscriber responded to.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to send cookies to subscribers when they confirm their subscription to an e-mail marketing program and link these up with advertiser server cookies.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability to construct new (temporary) "sub-lists" from any set of e-mail marketing subscribers in the database via a web interface.

It is an object of the invention to provide the ability for content creators to automatically include ads in an issue without manually inserting lengthy code.

It is an object of the invention to keep e-mail marketing statistics about each ad e-mailed, including total times each ad e-mailed, how many times each ad e-mailed per ezine, total times each ad responded to, and total unique responses for each ad.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 illustrates a basic network architecture for practicing the present invention.

Figure 2 illustrates a basic flow diagram for practicing the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

As used herein, the term "webmaster" refers to any entity, including an individual or

publisher, who uses a website to deliver or generate new subscribers to a product or service. A "participant" refers to any user of the present invention, including a webmaster or a subscriber.

The term "click(s)" refers to any measurable response from a consumer, including, but not limited to, selection by a mouse, rollerball, pointer, stylus, jog-dial, or any other user-selection device, and/or conversions or sales resulting therefrom. The term "internet" refers to any network of networks, whether wired or wireless, including WANs and global networks such as the ARPAnet-derived network commonly referred to as the Internet and the high-bandwidth Internet2.

The terms "ad(s)" and "advertisement(s)" refer to any creative or content produced, at least in part, for advertising purposes such as branding or the promotion of products or services. The term "e-mail" refers to any messaging to a specific entity over an internet to an internet-enabled device, including, but not limited to, both ordinary SMTP-based POP3 and IMAP e-mail, instant messaging (IM), and short messaging service (SMS). The term "e-mail address" refers to any identifier of a participant that allows for delivery of messages and/or content to the participant's internet-enabled device, including, but not limited to, standard "name@domain.tld" e-mail addresses, IP addresses, and phone numbers.

The following is a rough schema of the tables required by an ezine database of the preferred embodiment. Although described below with reference to an ezine, the system is equally suited for delivery of any information or content requested by subscribers to any internet-enabled device, including, but not limited to, newsletters, marketing messages, alerts and other subscriber requested content.

The "basic" tables describe individual entities in the ezine system: users (subscribers and webmasters), ads, and the different ezines themselves. These tables do not rely on information from other tables, and so have unique primary (i.e., not composite) keys.

Confirmation Table

Each row of this table describes one subscriber's confirmation information. Each row need only persist until a subscriber has confirmed their subscription, and can then be deleted. Columns:

- `email (primary key) // required, varchar(80), references email field in user table`

- ezine_code_list // required, varchar(60), space-delimited list of ezines initially signed up for, ignored once they have confirmed their signup - look in ezine_subscriber table instead.
- referring_account_number // required, varchar(80), references account_number in webmaster table for initial signup (before confirmation). Ignored after subscriber confirms - look in ezine_subscriber table instead.

User Table

Each row of this table describes information common to any participant (either subscriber or webmaster)

Columns:

Info for all participants (webmasters or subscribers)

- email (primary key) // required, varchar(80)
- first_name // required, varchar(30)
- last_name // required, varchar(30)
- zip_code // required, char(10)
- country // required, varchar(30), range is list of provided countries
- signup_datetime // required, datetime, this is the time when the subscriber is mailed their initial signup letter
- IP_address // required, char(15)
- is_valid_email // required -- is this a valid email address, char(1), Y|N
- admin_comments // optional, text, any comments that we want to add about this user. This is not information the user provides.
- is_active // optional, char(1), Y|N is this user

"active," i.e., can they receive ezines and be paid

- last_modified_timestamp // timestamp, not null
- num_bounced_deliveries // int, number of delivery attempts to this user which have bounced

Subscriber Table

Each row of this table describes one subscriber.

Columns:

- email (foreign key) // required, varchar(80), references email field in user table
- confirmation_string // required for S, char(64), md5(email)+ datetime + process ID
- cookie_info // required for S, varchar(100)
- is_HTML_reader // required, char(1), Y|N -- can this subscriber receive HTML-ified ezines

All these are optional info for subscribers. Different ones will be displayed to different subscribers when they sign up, based on the referring webmaster.

- gender // char(6), Male or Female
- age // char(10), ranges: <13,13-17,18-21,22-24,25-29,30-35,36-40,41-49,50-59,60-65,65+
- education_level // varchar(40), ranges: "some high school," "high school graduate," "some college," "vocational/technical training," "college graduate," "graduate school," "doctorate"
- marital_status // char(7), range is married|single
- num_children // char(2), range is 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5+
- occupation // varchar(40), range: "professional," "administrative/clerical," "management," "designer/artist," "Internet professional," "educator," "marketing/sales," "engineer," "writer," "homemaker,"

"military service," "consultant," "legal field," "student," "retired," "other"

- income // varchar(10), range: <25K, 25-49K, 50-74K, 75-99K, 100-149K, 150-199K, 200K+
- primary_computer_use // char(40), range is "home," "business," "home office," "school," "government facility"
- interests // text, range is a comma-delimited list of items that appear as checkboxes on the signup page: sports, travel, entertainment/humor, dining, investments, gaming, computing, autos, men's issues, women's issues, health issues, trivia, astrology
- items_purchased // varchar(255), any items the subscriber has purchased on the net
- like_to_purchase // varchar(255), any items the subscriber would like to purchase on the net
- plan_to_purchase // varchar(40), any items the subscriber is planning to purchase in the next year, range: "vehicle," "boat," "house," "computer equipment," "vacation package," "stereo equipment," "VCR"
- net_access_frequency // varchar(40), "every day," "once or twice a week," "two or three times a month," "once a month or less"
- wants_to_receive_email // char(1), Y|N -- does this subscriber want to receive email about items of interest
- last_modified_timestamp // timestamp, not null
- email_md5 // varchar(64), not null, this is the md5 hash value of the email address

Webmaster Table

Each row of this table describes one webmaster.

Columns:

- email (foreign key) // required, varchar(80), references email field in user table
- account_name // required, varchar(25), must be >= 6 chars
- account_number (primary key, auto_increment) // required, integer
- password // required, varchar(25), must be >= 6 chars
- address_line_1 // required, varchar(30)
- address_line_2 // optional, varchar(30)
- city // required, varchar(25)
- state // required, char(2), range is a list of state abbreviations, or N/A to indicate outside the US
- phone_number // required, varchar(20)
- payee_on_check // required, varchar(50)
- minimum_check_value // required, decimal(7,2)
- tax_ID_or_SSN // required, varchar(20)
- referral_rate // required -- for user referrals, decimal(4,2), default ".10"
- second_tier_rate // required -- for second-tier referrals, decimal(4,2), default ".04"
- referring_account_number // optional, varchar(80), the user who referred this one, references account_number field in webmaster table
- referring_URL // optional, varchar(80), website through which this webmaster was referred
- last_modified_timestamp // timestamp, not null

Sign-up Field Table

Each row of this table describes one possible field of data we want to collect for users.

Columns:

- field_name (primary key) // required, varchar(30), should exactly match one of the optional subscriber fields in the user table
- display_name //required - what the user sees on the web page, varchar(255)
- data_type // required, varchar(12), range is INT, STRING, DATE, etc.
- HTML_input_type // required -- type of control to show for this field on web page, varchar(12), range is checkbox, textfield, text, radio button, etc.
- value_range // optional, text, comma-delimited range if provided, else free-form text if not provided

Ezine Description Table

Each row of this table describes one ezine.

Columns:

- ezine_code (primary key) // required, char(2), two-character ezine code
- ezine_name // required, varchar(30), ezine name
- ezine_URL // required, varchar(80), ezine location
- short_description // required, varchar(80), description in a few words
- long_description // required, varchar(255), several sentence description
- thank_you_text // required, varchar(255), for signup
- is_active // required, char(1), Y|N -- is this an active ezine

- creation_datetime // datetime, when this ezine was created

Ad Table

Each row of this table describes one ad that can be inserted into an ezine issue

Columns:

- banner_id (primary key) // required, varchar(30)
- banner_text // required, TEXT
- banner_URL // required, varchar(80)
- num_clicks // required, BIGINT DEFAULT 0
- num_impressions // required, BIGINT DEFAULT 0
- is_active // required, char(1)
- entry_datetime // required, datetime

Advertiser Table

Each row of this table describes one advertiser

Columns:

- system_account (primary key) // varchar (50) not null
- advertiser_name (unique) // varchar (50), not null

Ad Campaign Table

Each row of this table describes one advertiser campaign

Columns:

- campaign_id (primary key) // varchar(30) not null
- system_account (unique) // varchar (50) not null, references system_account in advertiser table
- banner_id // varchar(30) not null, references banner_id in ads table
- num_clicks // bigint default 0
- num_impressions // bigint default 0
- start_datetime // datetime

- end_datetime // datetime
- comments // text
- gross_payment // decimal(5,2)
- percent_done // int(3)
- target_percent // int(3)
- unit_difference // bigint
- effective_CPM // bigint

The following tables are derived from information in the basic tables above. They also contain some information unique to themselves. Note that these tables could have duplicate ID keys, but will have unique composite keys.

Website Table

Each row of this table describes a webmaster and a website (since a webmaster might own several different sites).

Columns:

- site_URL (primary key) //required, varchar(80)
- site_name // required, varchar(80)
- site_description // required, varchar(255)
- account_number (foreign key) // required, varchar(80), references account_number field in webmaster table

Website Sign-up Field Table

Each row of this table describes a sign-up field to be displayed to new subscribers when they are referred by the specified website.

Columns:

- site_URL (foreign key) // required, varchar(80), references site_URL field in website table
- field_name (foreign key) // required, varchar(30), references field_name in signup field table
- is_required // required -- is this subscriber required to

fill in this field when they signup from this site, char(1), Y|N

Website Hosted Ezines Table

Each row of this table describes one ezine that can be hosted by a given website when the website is being used by a webmaster to generate subscriptions.

Columns:

- ezine_code (foreign key) // required, char(2), references ezine_code in ezine table;
- site_URL (foreign key) // required, varchar(80), references site_URL in signup field table

User Payout Table

Each row is the payout for a given participant on a given date if the participant is to be paid for the subscription.

Columns:

- account_number (foreign_key) // required, varchar(80), references account_number in webmaster table
- amount_paid // decimal(14,5), not null
- date_paid // required, date, when paid

Ezine Subscribers Table

Each row of this table describes one subscriber to a given ezine

Columns:

- email (foreign key) // required, varchar(80), references email in user table
- ezine_code (foreign key) // required, char(2), references ezine_code in ezine table
- signup_datetime // required, datetime, when user signed up to receive this ezine
- last_modified_timestamp // timestamp, this is the last

time that the user modified their subscription to this ezine. Initially this is the same as signup_datetime.

- is_active // required, char(1), Y|N-- is active recipient of this ezine
- referring_account_number // optional -- the first (and only) user who referred this subscriber to this ezine, varchar(80), references account_number key in webmaster table
- referring_URL // optional, varchar(80), the website through which the user subscribed to the ezine

Ezine Issue Table

Each row of this table describes one mailing or issue of any ezine

Columns:

- issue_id (primary key) // required, varchar(30)
- ezine_code (foreign_key) // required, char(2), references ezine_code in ezine table
- last_modified_timestamp // required, timestamp
- req_start_datetime // datetime, when delivery of this issue was requested to begin
- actual_start_datetime // datetime, when delivery of this issue actually began
- end_queue_datetime // datetime, when this issue was fully queued
- end_delivery_datetime // datetime, when issue's delivery completed
- status // required, char (1), status of this issue's delivery D|S|P|I (disabled, sent, pending, in progress)
- num_recipients // bigint, not null

Ezine Ad Stats Table

Each row of this table describes one ad's impression and click statistics for a given ezine or individual mailing of an ezine.

Columns:

- banner_id (foreign key) // required, varchar(30), references banner_id in ad table
- num_clicks // required, bigint, how many times this ad has been clicked from this ezine
- position_in_ezine // required, int(3), position of ad in ezine
- issue_id (foreign_key) // required, varchar(30) references issue_id in ezine_issue table

Subscriber Click Stats Table

Each row of this table describes one ad that a subscriber has clicked on

Columns:

- email_md5 (foreign_key) // required, varchar(64), references email_md5 in subscriber table
- banner_id (foreign_key) // required, varchar(30), references banner_id in ad table
- issue_id (foreign_key) // required, varchar(30), references issue_id in ezine_issue table

The following tables are for ezines administration purposes

Admin User table

Columns:

- username varchar(80) not null
- password varchar(30) not null
- first_name varchar(30) not null
- last_name varchar(30) not null
- signup_datetime datetime not null

- IP_address varchar(15) not null
- ezine char(1) not null
- user char(1) not null
- internal char(1) not null
- stats char(1) not null
- content char(1) not null

Admin Login Log Table

Columns:

- username varchar(80) not null
- entry_datetime datetime not null
- IP_address varchar(15) not null

Admin Error Log Table

Columns:

- username varchar(80) not null
- entry_datetime datetime not null
- IP_address varchar(15) not null
- error_msg varchar(50) not null

Admin Activity Log Table

Columns:

- username varchar(80) not null
- entry_datetime datetime not null
- IP_address varchar(15) not null
- function varchar(30) not null

The software of the invention also provides various web interface tools for the ezine system, including those used by ezine administrators, webmasters, subscribers, including:

- Ezine Content Creation

This allows a list creator/moderator to submit content for a list.

- Distribution Administration

  Allows ezine administrator to indicate start time for distribution of one or more ezines. Also allows administrator to cancel one or more distributions in progress. Administrator should be able to add or remove subscribers or webmasters, as needed.

- Stats Viewer

  Allows ad server personnel to view/extract database stats about ads, lists, webmasters, individual ezines, or subscribers.

- Subscriber Sign-up

  Allows subscribers to sign up for one or more ezines or other information they want. At this point, the user enters their e-mail address and selects the ezines or other information they want. A confirmation number is e-mailed to them, which they must use to confirm their sign-up. If possible, a cookie is put on their device at this point.

- Subscriber Confirmation

  This is where the user confirms their sign-up for the selected ezines. They are optionally required to fill out a survey. Once completed, they are added to the mailing list for the desired ezines or other information.

- Subscriber Ezine Change

  Allows subscribers to sign-up for new ezines or cancel subscription to ezines they're already receiving.

- Webmaster Sign-up

  Allows webmasters to sign up, and indicate a referring (second-tier) webmaster. The webmaster is required to fill out a survey of information.

- Webmaster Stats/Admin

  Allows webmasters to view the stats for the number of subscribers and webmasters they've referred to the program (and the payout they'll receive). They can also change their account info and get the required HTML code to place on their webpages or get other information needed to refer subscribers.

- Conversion utility

  Imports existing flat files into a database (i.e., MySQL or Oracle). These are a series of perl or other language scripts that process the various flat files, and write a handful of new flat files which contain the combined data. These new flat files can then be

imported into the database via the LOAD or other command.

- Bounce remover

  Removes undeliverable addresses from the database. To facilitate this, the present invention adds its own header to each e-mail sent: X-Sent-To: address@domain.com.

An example of the webmaster coding which can be provided as part of this invention is disclosed in the following JavaScript:

```
<script language="javascript">
function thankyou_ne() {
        var w =
window.open("","thankyou","scrollbars=yes,resizable=no,toolbar
=no,directories=no,status=no,menubar=no,location=no,screnX=200
,screenY=200,width=640,height=500");
        return true;
}
</script>
```

This is how the <form> tag is defined:

```
<form target="thankyou"
action="http://webserver1.teknosurf.com/cgi-bin/subscribe.cgi"
method="post" onsubmit="return (
(this.email.value.indexOf(&amp;quot;@&amp;quot;)&amp;gt;0 &amp;amp;&amp;amp;
this.email.value.indexOf(&amp;quot;.&amp;quot;)&amp;gt;0) ? thankyou_ne()
: (alert(&amp;quot;Please enter a valid email address.&amp;quot;) ||
false) )">
```

The following line is added to the form:

```
<input type="hidden" name="code_num" value="1">
```

In operating the present invention, it is preferable to use a webmaster's account_number instead of account_name in referring_account field. This requires changes

to the import script. Also, if user logs in via account_name, the system can get the corresponding number and pass that along to the webmaster-*.cgi scripts.

Figure 1 illustrates a basic network architecture for practicing the present invention, wherein an ad server **110** supplies the needed software to webmaster servers **120** and subscriber devices **130**, either directly or indirectly (i.e., via another webmaster server or subscriber device which already has downloaded the software) over internet **100**.

In a preferred embodiment, the ad server **110** provides both an ad server database **112** and a referral/payout database **114**. The system also can include a separate list server **140**, that maintains its own subscriber list database **142**, and a separate content server **150**.

Figure 2 illustrates a basic flow diagram for practicing the present invention. An initial step **200** in the process is for webmasters to sign-up and download the software needed to practice the invention from an enabling entity such as an ad server. This sign-up can be done in any suitable manner, but is preferably accomplished through use of a web-based sign-up form or page, wherein the webmaster provides the input required for the user table and the webmaster table, as described above. This input can also include any referring webmaster information.

Consumers, likewise at **220**, sign-up and download the software they need to practice the invention from an enabling entity such as an ad server or webmaster server. Again, this sign-up can be done in any suitable manner, but is preferably accomplished through use of a web-based sign-up form or page, wherein the consumer provides the input required for the confirmation table, user table, and subscriber table, as described above. This input can also include any referring webmaster or referring subscriber information.

As participants, the webmasters and subscribers have the necessary software/code to refer, at **230**, other webmasters and subscribers and this information is tracked by the ad server, at **250**.

The information or content that the subscriber has opted-in to receive is e-mailed to the subscriber at **240**, and the subscriber responses are tracked at **250**.

The information collected is then used for purposes such as to calculate incentives and payouts for the program participants, at **260**. Additionally, the ad server can analyze the collected information by categories/fields, including but not limited to, website, ezine, ad campaign, ad, ad position, subscriber (including demographics, etc.), time, etc. to improve the effectiveness of the marketing response.

As disclosed above, the present invention makes it easy to collect, manage, and communicate with consumers using e-mail and other forms of push-based messaging as the primary vehicle for communication of marketing content. The present system makes it simple to offer bounties or other types of compensation to any participant interested in referring new users into the system as well as offer a multiple tier referral system so that those participants can refer others as well. The present invention makes it possible to track the entire path of a communication and all of the actions inside of it for modeling, reporting, auditing and other analytical purposes. The system also simplifies the process for generating custom marketing communications in large capacity. The present invention simplifies the process of enabling the selection, insertion and delivery of marketing communications inside of the main communication layer and enables an administrator to easily administer all aspects of the software from an intuitive web based interface. As disclosed, it enables the systems to run self-sufficient and be monitored for maximum performance. The present invention also enables the entire system to be scaleable.

I Claim:

1. A method for e-mail-based opt-in marketing, comprising:

providing an ad server connected to an internet;

providing a database connected to said ad server;

having at least one webmaster server connected to said internet;

having at least one internet-enabled subscriber device connected to said internet;

providing software instructions on each said webmaster server for collecting an e-mail address for said subscriber device and storing said e-mail address on said database by having an operator of said subscriber device input said e-mail address and make a selection to opt-in for delivery of information and/or content to said e-mail address; and

providing software instructions on said ad server to facilitate delivery of said information and/or content to said subscriber device, wherein said information and/or content includes an ad.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising providing an incentive to said subscriber.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein said incentive is for responding to said ad and is selected from the group consisting of redeemable program points, prizes, discounts on goods or services, sweepstakes entries, currency, and goods or services.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising providing compensation to said webmaster or said subscriber for referrals.

5. The method of claim 1, further comprising providing compensation to said webmaster or said subscriber for subscriber responses to ads in said information and/or content.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein said information and/or content is selected from the group consisting of ezines, newsletters, alerts and marketing messages.

7. A system for e-mail-based opt-in marketing, comprising:

an ad server connected to an internet;

a database connected to said ad server;

at least one webmaster server connected to said internet;

at least one internet-enabled subscriber device connected to said internet;

software instructions on each said webmaster server for collecting an e-mail address for said subscriber device and storing said e-mail address on said database by having an operator of said subscriber device input said e-mail address and make a selection to opt-in for delivery of information and/or content to said e-mail address; and

software instructions on said ad server to facilitate delivery of said information and/or content to said subscriber device, wherein said information and/or content includes an ad.

8. The system of claim 7, further comprising means to provide an incentive to said subscriber for opting-in.

9. The system of claim 8, wherein said incentive is selected from the group consisting of redeemable program points, prizes, discounts on goods or services, sweepstakes entries, currency, and goods or services.

10. The system of claim 7, further comprising means for providing compensation to said webmaster or said subscriber for referrals.

11. The system of claim 7, further comprising means for providing compensation to said webmaster or said subscriber for subscriber responses to ads in said information and/or content.

12. The system of claim 7, wherein said information and/or content is selected from the group consisting of ezines, newsletters, and marketing messages.

13. A method for encouraging consumers to participate in an e-mail marketing program, comprising:

providing means for said consumer to opt-in to subscribe to receive ad-containing information and/or content at their e-mail address from said e-mail marketing program;

providing software to said consumer to allow said consumer to refer other consumers to said e-mail marketing program as referrals;

providing compensation to said consumer for any referrals; and

providing incentives to said consumer for responding to ads in said information and/or content.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein said compensation is selected from the group consisting of currency, goods or services, discounts on goods or services, redeemable program points and prizes.

15. The method of claim 13, wherein said incentives are selected from the group consisting of sweepstakes entries, currency, goods or services, discounts on goods or services, redeemable program points and prizes.

16. The method of claim 13, wherein said information and/or content is selected from the group consisting of ezines, newsletters, and marketing messages.

17. A method for encouraging webmasters to participate in an e-mail marketing program,

comprising:

providing software to said webmaster to allow said webmaster to subscribe consumers to receive ad-containing information and/or content at their e-mail address from said e-mail marketing program;

providing software to said webmaster to allow said webmaster to refer other webmasters to said e-mail marketing program as referrals;

providing compensation to said webmaster for any referrals; and

providing compensation to said webmaster for subscribing consumers to said e-mail marketing program.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein said compensation is selected from the group consisting of currency, goods or services, discounts on goods or services, redeemable program points and prizes.

19. The method of claim 17, wherein said information and/or content is selected from the group consisting of ezines, newsletters, and marketing messages.

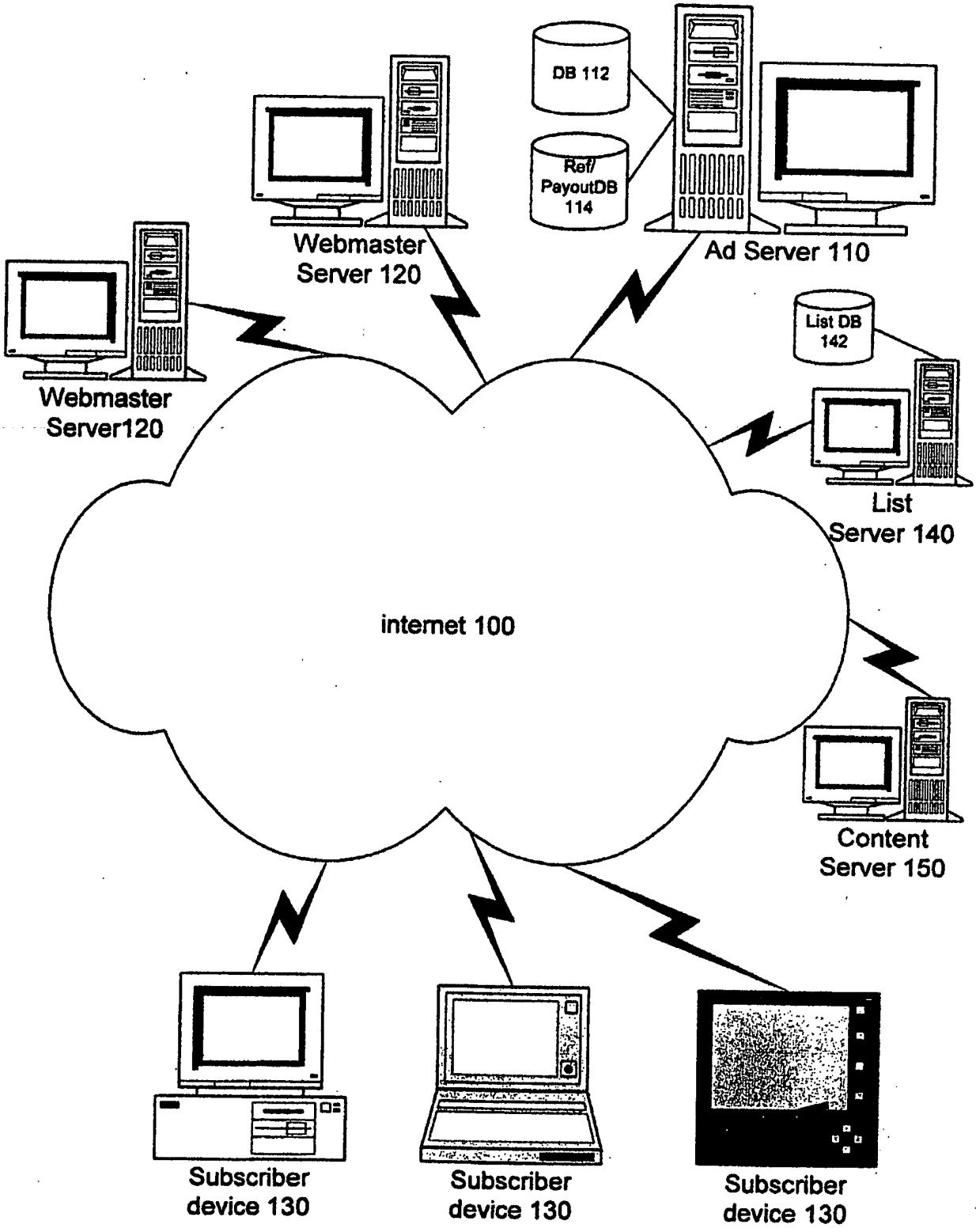
DB 112
Ref/
PayoutDB
114
Ad Server 110
Webmaster
Server 120
Webmaster
Server120
List DB
142
List
Server 140
internet 100
Content
Server 150
Subscriber
device 130
Subscriber
device 130
Subscriber
device 130

FIG. 1

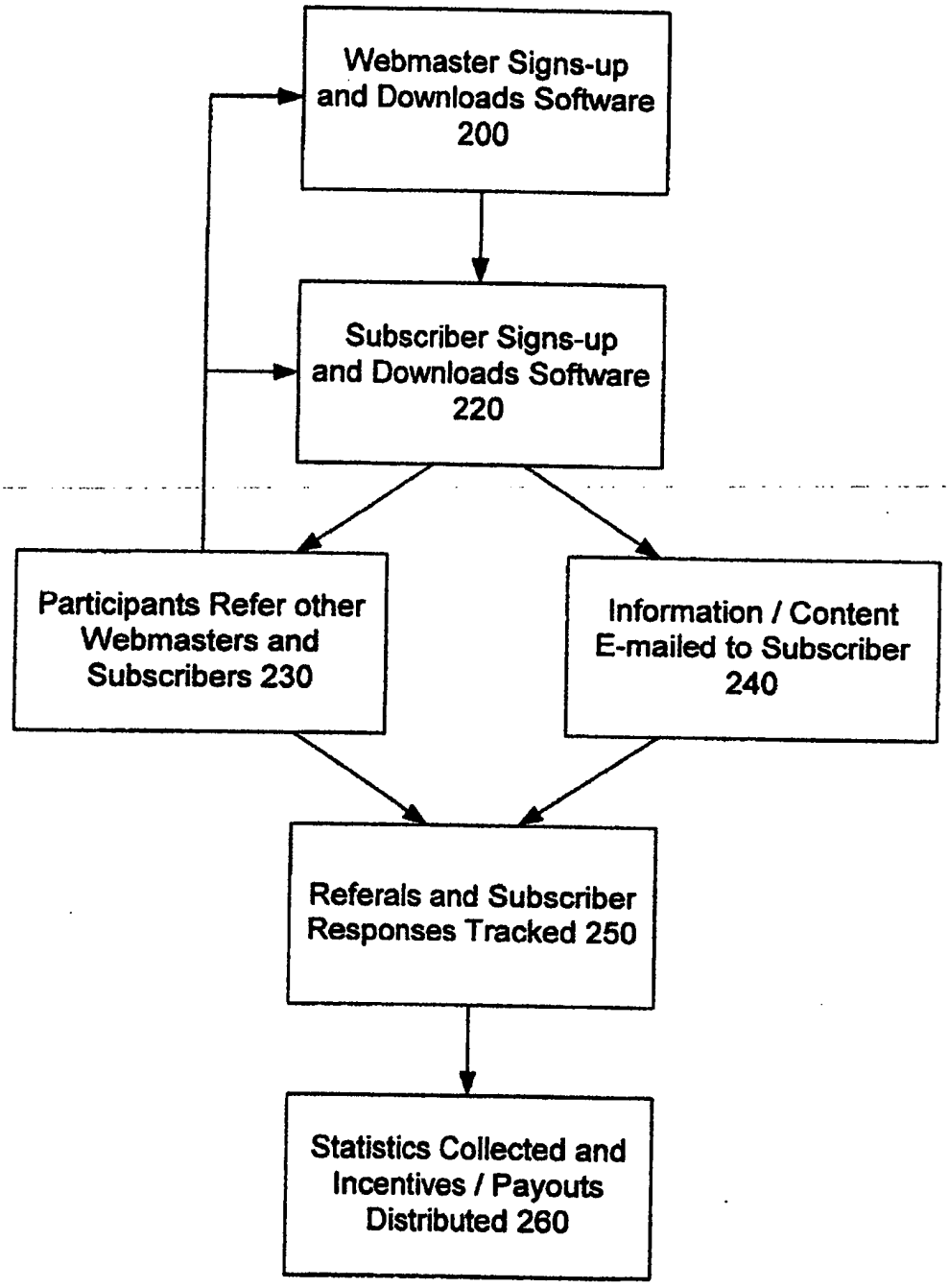
Webmaster Signs-up and Downloads Software 200
Subscriber Signs-up and Downloads Software 220
Participants Refer other Webmasters and Subscribers 230
Information / Content E-mailed to Subscriber 240
Referals and Subscriber Responses Tracked 250
Statistics Collected and Incentives / Payouts Distributed 260

FIG. 2